Leading Ideas:

Revisiting the Abilene Paradox: Is Management of Agreement Still an Issue?

by Kathryn J. Deiss, ARL Office of Leadership and Management Services Program Manager

In 1974, Professor Jerry Harvey of George Washington University developed a parable from a real-life experience to describe the issues surrounding how individuals reach agreement, or, more specifically, *believe* they have reached agreement. Twenty-five years later the lessons and insights his parable generates are still valid and provocative for organizations and the individuals who work together in those organizations.

The Parable of the Abilene Paradox[1]

Four adults are sitting on a porch in 104-degree heat in the small town of Coleman, Texas, some 53 miles from Abilene. They are engaging in as little motion as possible, drinking lemonade, watching the fan spin lazily, and occasionally playing the odd game of dominoes. The characters are a married couple and the wife's parents. At some point, the wife's father suggests they drive to Abilene to eat at a cafeteria there. The son-in-law thinks this is a crazy idea but doesn't see any need to upset the apple cart, so he goes along with it, as do the two women. They get in their unair-conditioned Buick and drive through a dust storm to Abilene. They eat a mediocre lunch at the cafeteria and return to Coleman exhausted, hot, and generally unhappy with the experience. It is not until they return home that it is revealed that *none* of them really wanted to go to Abilene–they were just going along because they thought the others were eager to go. Naturally, everyone sees this miss in communication as someone else's problem!

Dr. Harvey used this wonderfully simple parable to illustrate what he believes is a major symptom of organizational dysfunction: the management of agreement–as opposed to the management of disagreement or conflict. This unique perspective has much to teach us about how we do or do not engage in deep inquiry and in self-disclosure when attempting to come to agreement with others.

How Do We Know When We Are Headed for Abilene?

Harvey points to six characteristics emblematic of a group failing to manage agreement effectively:

1. Members individually, but privately, agree about their current situation. The group in Coleman knew individually that they were satisfied with just sitting on the porch.
2. Members agree, again in private, about what it would take to deal with the situation. In this case, the members privately agreed that staying on the porch was a good way to spend a hot and dusty day.
3. Members fail to communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another, and, most importantly, sometimes even communicate the very opposite of their wishes based on what they assume are the desires and opinions of others. People make incorrect assumptions about consensus. In the Abilene case, one suggestion (offered on the assumption that the people wanted to do something

besides sit on the porch) began a domino-like sequence of individual agreement with the concept in spite of each person's private misgivings about the desirability and wisdom of making the trip to Abilene.

4. Based on inaccurate perceptions and assumptions, members make a collective decision that leads to action. It is in the action that it becomes apparent that the decision is contrary to individual desires. They thereby arrive at a destination they did not want to go to in the first place. Our protagonists in the parable do not actually discover their unanimous disagreement with the action they took until someone says, "Well, that was a nice trip." Another person is then moved by frustration and exhaustion to blurt out the truth, "It was not a good idea or a nice trip!"

5. Members experience frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction with the organization. Often this leads to the forming of sub-groups that take combative or blaming positions toward each other. The Abilene group begins asking themselves immediately, "Whose crazy idea was this anyway?" and thus starts the blaming cycle.

6. Finally, members are destined to repeat this unsatisfying and dysfunctional behavior if they do not begin to understand the genesis of mismanaged agreement.

Sources of the Paradox

It is provocative to ask why people would actually speak against their own desires. What psychological reasons are there for doing something that is bound to result in both individual discomfort and in a lack of full and valid information for the group and our organizations? It is believed, according to Harvey, that people behave in this manner because they are afraid of the unknown. His hypothesis, quite different from others, is that we know what we are afraid of and that it generally has to do with loneliness, being left out, separation, and alienation. To avoid these, we will actually act against our best interests, hoping to be "part" of something, members of the whole.

We also tend to believe that any decision or action is better than no action at all. The problem is that there is incomplete information in individual minds. The need to act together, to be seen as cohesive, overrides the need to be explicit about group assumptions, desires, opinions, and even facts. Harvey calls this "action anxiety" and he believes it works in close conjunction with another piece of the paradox puzzle: negative fantasies. These are fantasies each individual harbors of what they think would happen if they actually spoke their minds and offered their desires or opinions to the group.

Breaking the Cycle of Wrong Assumptions and Fear

Breaking the cycle that so often leads us to blaming each other for decisions and actions that we "knew" we did not agree with in the first place is critical to the health and effectiveness of an organization or work group. It can only be accomplished by building new communication habits and getting beyond our fears.

Harvey believes that collusion motivates us to accept decisions and actions with which we fundamentally disagree or question. We submit to becoming victims by our own collusion with thinking that we believe to be wrong-headed or, at the very least, headed in the wrong direction. Avoiding "making a trip to Abilene" in our organizations takes the courageous act by each of us of both refusing to be victims and refusing to victimize others.

One of the modern-day problems we have revolves around something called "teamwork." Teamwork is a problem insofar as we do not define or carefully delineate behaviors related to effective teamwork–particularly those behaviors related to questioning and inquiring into proposed group decisions or acts. Team members often feel that if they do not agree with the group, particularly when they seem to be the only ones not agreeing, they will suffer by being alienated or "wrong." Helping team members learn how to question assumptions, their own included, can develop strong decision-making powers within the

team. The team will then become much better at managing agreement.

Practices That Develop Agreement Skills

Building new behaviors and working against personal fear can only go so far in helping groups or teams avoid needless "trips to Abilene." However, there are some practices that, if developed, can help individuals, groups, and teams become more proficient. The following practices and exercises can be found in Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*.[2]

The left-hand/right-hand column exercise was conceived of by Chris Argyris, Harvard University professor and consultant. It requires individuals to draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper. At the top, right-hand side, the individual writes, "What is said," and at the top of the left side he or she writes, "What I'm thinking." Individuals can do this exercise after a meeting or simply reflect on previous situations to access their thinking and interaction process. Rick Ross and Art Kleiner, in their description of the tool, suggest some guiding questions to ask oneself during this reflexive exercise:

- What has really led me to think and feel this way?
- What was my intention? What was I trying to accomplish?
- How did my comments contribute to group decision, action, confusion, or difficulty?
- Why didn't I say what was in my left-hand column?
- What assumptions was I making about others in the group?[3]

This tool helps to develop a better awareness of one's reasons for speaking or for not speaking thoughts, and gives a format for sharing thoughts in a non-accusatory, nonjudgmental way with others. This tool is designed to be used as an individual discipline and awareness tool, not as a meeting management tool.

Another practice is that of balancing advocacy with inquiry.[4] Put simply, advocating a position, decision, or action needs to be balanced with genuine inquiry into the positions or opinions of others involved. An example that might have helped the Abilene group: the wife's father could have left the door open to discover others' real feelings by directly asking what the others were thinking, and by revealing why he was making the suggestion to go to Abilene. Doing so would have allowed others to understand his thinking pattern, and thus allow them to respond in a like manner.

The Ladder of Inference, a tool also developed by Argyris, lets us see how we "infer" from someone's actions or words what they really mean.[5] Although we naturally make inferences all the time, knowing that we are doing it allows us to stop and ask others why they came to certain conclusions.

Finally, a little-practiced tool that groups can use is dialogue.[6] Dialogue, as used here, is a term that was developed by a group of people working on organizational learning. It describes an open-ended exploration and discovery process that has no decision point. The point of this is to understand the subject, the data, the assumptions, the lack of information, etc. as deeply as possible. This technique allows groups to actually think together more effectively. The dialogue process and its contents (individual thoughts and feelings) are shared such that any future actions are more likely to be owned by the group.

Building strong dialogue and advocacy/inquiry skills, as well as building confidence that one will not be alienated if one speaks one's mind, are necessary for making the decision not to go to Abilene.

Conclusion

Libraries and other information service agencies make decisions and take actions every day. Often these

decisions and actions are based on a false sense of consensus within the group. To better avoid this, we need to have a clear definition of consensus and how it is reached. At ARL, our definition is:

> *Consensus occurs when all key stakeholders build the decision, accept it, and support it, even though the final decision may not be the first preference of each individual member. In other words, consensus is not about voting!*

We need to raise individual and group consciousness about the problems of not testing early and often for consensus. We need to build strong dialogue, inquiry, and advocacy skills and learn how to use them as is situationally appropriate. And, finally, we need to learn how to avoid true loneliness by giving our thoughts and opinions voice and trusting the group with which we are working.

An undesired and frustrating trip to Abilene in 104-degree heat should be a compelling image in our minds of the critical need to attend to how we manage agreement in libraries.

Endnotes

[1]Jerry B. Harvey, *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988). The original publication of the Abilene Paradox appeared as: "The Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement," in *Organizational Dynamics* (Summer 1974).

[2]Peter Senge, et al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

[3]Rick Ross and Art Kleiner, "The Left-Hand Column," in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, 246-50.

[4]Rick Ross and Charlotte Roberts, "Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry," in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, 253-59. This process is based on the Advocacy/Inquiry Matrix developed by Diana McLain Smith.

[5]Rick Ross, "The Ladder of Inference," in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, 242. This tool is based on extensive research done by the Harvard scholar and professor, Chris Argyris.

[6]William Isaacs, "Dialogue," in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, 357-64.

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